ESPIONAGE

Mail-Order Missile

First there was the mysterious death of Rear Admiral Hermann Lüdke, suspected of photographing NATO documents for a foreign power. Then came the suicides of four other West Germans involved in government or defense work. West German counterintelligence agents had only begun to sort all that out when Bonn admitted yet another serious—and bizarre—security gaffe. Attorney General Ludwig Martin announced that three men had been arrested for providing the Soviet Union with secret equipment, including a U.S.-designed missile, stolen from a supposedly tightly guarded NATO base.

The trio's exploits began in April 1967. Master Sergeant Wolf-Diethard Knope, a Luftwaffe Starfighter pilot, Josef Linowski, a Polish-born civilian, and Manfred Ramminger, another civilian, worked together to steal a navigational device from the Zell airbase in southern Germany. Ramminger then casually packed it in his suitcase and flew off to Moscow to deliver his prize. That, however, was a mere warm-up for their big operation.

Returning to Zell six months later, they clipped their way through a barbed-wire fence, broke into a storage shed and dragged out a Sidewinder missile. An air-to-air heat-seeking weapon used by American planes in Viet Nam, the Sidewinder is about 9½ ft. long and weighs 165 lbs. Undaunted, the trio trundled the missile to their car in a wheelbarrow, broke the car's rear window to fit the rocket in, wrapped a rug around its protruding end, and drove more than 100 miles across West Germany to an undisclosed city.

From there it was a matter of getting the purloined rocket to Moscow. To the profound embarrassment of the Bonn government, that proved to be the simplest part of the whole caper. The spies took the Sidewinder apart, wrapped it in packages and sent the pieces on the next commercial airliner going to the Soviet Union—via ordinary postal air freight. The cost: $79.25.